

Since passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 and the \"deregulation\" of cable television, consumers have seen their rates jump an average of 59 percent -- with some areas experiencing even more dramatic increases. The cost of cable modem service remains out of reach for many households, holding constant for years and selectively underserving rural and low-income Americans. The American people are watching the digital divide widen even as the need for access to high-speed networks increases.

The FCC, through this Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, recognizes that new video competition is entering the market, as phone companies (like AT&T and Verizon) begin to roll out television. The Commission asks if the telephone companies are slowed or blocked in their expansion by the process of negotiating franchises - the agreements that companies seeking to provide video services sign with local governments which set the terms for building cable television systems.

These franchise agreements are what guarantee that local governments control rights-of-way and obtain fair rents from the companies that dig them up to lay cable. They guarantee universal build-out of the technology and its advantages to every household in the community, not just affluent neighborhoods. They guarantee public access television, funding to provide it, as well as other services like low-cost broadband for our schools and libraries.

Though the franchising process has not been perfect, it has been a critical safeguard to protect the interests of consumers and citizens in our local communities. Now that the phone companies are building television systems, local communities are hungry for new competition that could drive down costs, increase options, provide local access to local content and bring us closer to bridging the digital divide.

Does the franchising process need reform? Perhaps. However, the most important problem is not how to ensure the process is changed to suit the interests of telephone companies. Instead, the most important problem is how to ensure that the rights and services of local communities are protected and enriched. We should start with these desired outcomes and work backwards to see if the process to deliver them can be improved. Local governments undoubtedly will - and must - play a key role in any future

franchising process.

As new franchising rules are considered, a number of market realities must be taken into account. There is a distinct lack of independent programming, particularly local independent programming, on cable systems. This is largely the result of vertical and horizontal consolidation amongst the largest media companies and cable providers. We are required to buy channels we don't want or need because the cable operators bundle them together. The quality of customer service often reflects the fact that cable television is not a competitive market. The mere presence of satellite providers does not drive down rates, nor does it yet present other reasonable options for broadband access.

In many communities, the only truly independent sources of local news, information and culture come from the public channels produced at local access centers. They are the only way many citizens see local government in action and often the only way residents get information about events happening close-to-home. Some towns have been able to negotiate for funding to make these resources more powerful. Others have obtained wired schools and libraries, resources for e-medicine, government efficiency programs and other educational initiatives. All use their negotiating power to ensure the entire community is served.

The risk of supplying \"one size fits all\" franchises to new providers is the elimination of these and other valuable services that fulfill important public policy aims. There is surely a need for new providers of broadband and video content to enter existing markets, be they private or public.

However, no matter the level at which 'franchises' to new providers are granted - be it local, state, or national - local communities cannot be cut out of the process. They must be allowed to lend their voice to how new video and broadband systems will be implemented and what features will be available to meet future needs.

Do not let consumer issues or big business profits ruin what is perhaps the last vestige of Democracy through electronic media. Please protect local franchise authorities and ensure strongest protection possible for public access channels such as WCCA TV.

For the last 20 years WCCA TV 13, \"The People's Channel\" has given over 84 million dollars in community media public access service. Thousands of hours of community produced TV programs, television and multi media workshops, access to state of the art equipment, an electronic platform or soapbox to freely express ideas and opinions and share information. All made possible by local franchise support through funding and capital provided through an exchange of local rights of way.

WCCA TV is a thriving community media center where citizen are producing their own relevant television programs and more. Public Access television is: TV by the People, For the People, Of the People. Worcester is a very diverse urban city, the second largest city in Massachusetts and New England. WCCA TV provides services for thousands of citizens and organizations. Public access television empowers all citizens no matter what their economic status, by giving them an equal opportunity to participate in civic debate, share opinions, tell their stories, share heritage and culture free from corporate retribution and political whim.

Here is a bullet sample of what local franchise authority has made it possible for through public access television in Worcester: WCCA to provide access 24/7 every day of the year for the past 20 years, We provide the first medial literacy program in the City, Provide comprehensive training in workforce development, computer applications, television production, KidsNet/Youth channel (year round after school multi media hands on experience of youth at risk), two community news productions (in English on Spanish), we present over 145 hours per week of local originated video programming covering a vast range of topics from veterans, municipal, forums, candidate profiles, health, educational, news and information, and new ideas and opinions, WCCA also offers free community computer lab and WiFi making it possible for anyone to gain free access to the internet. Most use this time to search for jobs, write resumes, check email or learn to produce graphics to be applied on TV shows.

This is too valuable to loose. Please focus on protecting the civic values and benefits that emanate from the local PUBLIC ACCESS TV channels and the public access process.

Local franchise agreements are the only mechanism that protects and ensures the existence of local Public, Educational and Governmental (PEG)

Access TV channels and centers. Local video franchises between municipalities and the Cable TV companies have served the community for three decades; phone companies offering Video Services must have local franchises just as the Cable TV companies do. In order to protect PEG channels and facilities, we must ensure that local municipalities have the authority to require local video franchising. Again.

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